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The need for students to use new vocabulary words in complete sentences is stressed, so that the teacher may be certain the words are properly understood and a part of the student's vocabulary. Examples show student confusion arising from a misinterpretation of the dictionary definition or a failure to recognize parts of speech. The special problems in teaching idioms are briefly discussed. (AF)

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# A Test of Meaning

From teaching courses in college composition and vocabulary building, I have come to realize how inadequately most of our students are prepared in vocabulary. Of course, much of the secret is that they have not been readers in the past and they don't know how to use a dictionary. But teachers and vocabulary workbooks are also to blame, for they operate frequently on a false assumption: that being able to define a word or to select a meaning from a number of possible meanings is an indication that the student knows the word and has added it to his vocabulary. Often, nothing could be more erroneous. All that is needed to show the falsity in the assumption is to have the student use the words in sentences. Then will appear such sentences as these:

- *Abeyance* is a fear of the working man.
- The passing train caused the ground to *tremor*.
- The sauce was so *ichor* that it brought tears to my eyes.
- He was a *cursive* character.

A glance at these errors shows that they fall into two rather clearly defined types. One is confusion of meaning, or misinterpretation of the dictionary meaning. The other is failure to recognize and to realize the importance of parts of speech.

*Abeyance*, above, lies in this first category. Had the student who wrote the sentence been asked for a definition of *abeyance*, he probably would have said "temporary inactivity or suspension," and the teacher would have thought he knew the word. But the sentence shows that he does not know the word, that he is thinking of the word as a synonym for *suspension* or *layoff*—what a workingman might well fear.

The two middle examples above show the trouble created when students don't understand or appreciate the importance of the part of speech of a word, a label usually supplied adequately by the dictionary. Had the student who wrote *tremor* for *tremble* been sufficiently conscious of the difference between the labels *n.* and *v.* (or between nouns and verbs), he wouldn't have made his error. And had the student who wrote *ichor*, above, been sufficiently aware of the difference between *n.* and *adj.*, he might have written *ichorous*, if he had decided to use the word at all.

The student who referred to a man as a *cursive* character misinterpreted the dictionary and was confused by the word *character*. He found the definition "a cursive character" and thought of the expression "He's a character," and made the transfer. Of course, he failed to realize that he was not clarifying the meaning of the word by so using it; he was apparently grateful for being able to put it into a sentence.

What do these errors show? They show that using a word in a sentence is no guarantee that the word will be used correctly; however, they illustrate as no other method can the error in assuming that being able to define a word indicates that a student knows the word and has made it his own. They also show the teacher the errors in the students' approach to words, and they enable him to check and help the students in their vocabulary building. These are important tasks for the teacher, and for the student, and they are not accomplished by vocabulary tests alone. Of course, all this is actually already well-known, if not applied; it is simply following the rule that says "The way to learn to do something is to do it," or that "Right practice makes perfect."

Often when I read student writing I am reminded of the moral of one of Thurber's fables for our time, "The Sheep in Wolf's Clothing"—"Don't get it right, just get it written." Of course, it isn't just student writing that seems to practice this dictum; it is apparent everywhere, perhaps most obviously in advertising, where the reason behind it is different however. Perhaps before long, communication will completely break down, and people will wander around babbling incessantly words that no one but themselves can understand. How else explain sentences like these?—"The Yankees *obsess* the American League. Our church is undergoing *curacy*. Please *advert* from pleasure to homework. The *occlude* forced him to turn around and go out the other way. He is very *professed* in his field."

In addition to these serious errors discovered only when words are used in sentences, other kinds of errors also become apparent. Omission of a word is frequent —"While in *mesmeric* he did it. The boys came to the party *supervene*." Certain little errors may be the result of spelling, hearing, or carelessness—"a tough road to hold. . . . be one in the same. . . . escape through wine, liquor, and the din of iniquity. Without imagination we would live in a strictly scientifically cut and dry world. . . . the audience is moreless seduced into listening."

So, what is the answer to greater accuracy in vocabulary? The answer is for the student to use the words in sentences, to have them checked by a teacher, and then to re-use them correctly. In addition, class discussion, in which the words are not only used but also talked about, will obviate many errors.

Idiom is a field in itself and too broad to be included here, but discussion of idiom and calling the students' attention to idiom will help somewhat to eliminate such errors as "improvements are controlled *on* the most part by . . ." and "this book *comprises of* many parts."

Of course, no one would want to eliminate all errors, for occasionally an error shows a touch of inadvertent genius on the writer's part and provides a pleasant glow for the reader. A class and its teacher

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will always remember the girl who replied too quickly when asked what the husband of a duchess was called. "A dutchman," she said. Also Virginia Woolf's "The Duchess and the Jeweller" will always be just a little more precious because of this sentence written by a student in a theme—"He let the duchess sell him false perils." And anyone might well wonder what was in the mind of the boy who wrote, "His mother also contributed to the development of his character. She gave him a feeling of insecurity."

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